

Royal Botanic Gardens Kew

Inspiring futures

Kim Walker



Tell us about your job

I am a PhD student at Kew. I study the history of how drugs were developed from plants in the 19th century. I study Cinchona (Cinchona sp.), also known as 'fever tree'. Cinchona bark contains a chemical called quinine which is used to fight malaria, and also used in tonic water.

I work in the Economic Botany Collection which was started in 1847 to inspire people to use plants in diverse ways and has 100,000 plant-based products.

Why is science important in your career?

Science helps us ask the right questions to discover answers to tricky problems – like what new medicine could we use for malaria?

What is your average work day like?

First, I have a cup of tea and check my diary. Then I swap between writing, examining objects and searching for 200-year-old letters and books. Sometimes I welcome visitors who come to visit to see things like ancient Egyptian flower necklaces or shoes made of rubber tree latex. It is fun to meet people working on different projects around plants; you can always learn something new.

Did you go to university? If so, what did you study? If not, what did you do after leaving school?

Yes I did, but not until I was 26! I didn't know what I wanted to do right after school and that is OK. I am glad I waited to experience different jobs and work out what I really wanted to do and what I really DIDN'T want to do.

I studied for a BSc in Herbal Medicine for my degree, then specialised later in researching the history of plant drugs at MSc level.

What sort of personality traits do you have that help you in your career?

I am really persistent and dogged. At school, I didn't get the best grades in the world, but my work always pays off because I keep working hard at something. It can be a bit scary to start research projects, but if you find something to do that is enjoyable and you believe in yourself, you can do it!

What helped you get your role at Kew?

I did an internship here, which helped me to understand the structure of Kew and find out which area of botany I liked. Kew now pays for some internships, which can help some people who could not afford to do one. During my internship I worked hard, talked to lots of people and asked questions, showing my enthusiasm, which helped me find further work here.

What advice would you give to someone considering a career like yours?

Work hard but don't forget to have fun. Don't be afraid of getting things wrong. This is where you start to really know your subject; understanding why things go wrong are as important as getting them right.

What do you want people to know about your work?

Plants are the basis to life – for food, fuels and medicines. Before plastics were invented, plants were also the key to clothes, materials and packaging. Kew's Economic Botany Collection probably has plenty of alternative plastic solutions!

Museum collections aren't just dusty objects in glass cabinets; they can reveal secrets if you know how to 'read' them.

History isn't something that has been and gone – asking questions about the past can help us understand the present.

Want a career that grows?

Build your skills in science, technology, engineering, art and maths to give yourself a chance to blossom in a career like one of these varied and exciting jobs at Kew.

You could make a real difference to the world.

For further information: www.kew.org